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ABSTRACT

A study among 207 preservice teachers was conducted to discover their patterns of theoretical orientation toward reading and whether such patterns differed between students seeking elementary certification and those seeking secondary certification. The students responded in writing to an interview about reading, presented in the form of a questionnaire. The answers were analyzed as representing decoding, skills, or whole language orientation. It was discovered that there was a significant tendency to prefer a skills orientation in each subgroup and in the entire sample. No significant differences appeared between the subgroups. (TJ)

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Theoretical Orientation toward Reading Among Preservice Teachers: A Preliminary Study

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Both reading teachers and their students have consistent theoretical orientations toward reading. The teacher's orientation is manifested in instruction which controls, to a great extent, the orientation and reading performance of students (Barr, 1974-75; DeLawter, 1975; Harste and Burke, 1977; Norton, 1977; Stansell, et. al, 1978). Examination of the orientations of preservice teachers is therefore warranted, as an initial step in describing and evaluating their future impact upon students.

The present study investigated the patterns of theoretical orientation among preservice teachers and whether such patterns differed between students seeking elementary certification and those seeking secondary certification.

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Method

Sample

The study involved a sample of 207 undergraduate teacher education students classified as either juniors or seniors. Those students in the sample who were seeking elementary certification were all enrolled in a reading specialization program. Among those seeking secondary certification, teaching fields included English, social studies, math, science, agriculture, and physical education.

Procedure

Each student in the sample responded in writing to a reading interview developed by Carolyn Burke and partially described in Harste and Burke (1977). The interview consists of ten questions about reading which elicit responses that indicate the language unit that person sees as key to reading. For example, the first question is "When you are reading and come to something you don't know, what do you do?" In answering this question it is totally up to the respondent to describe whether the "something" mentioned is a paragraph, a sentence, a word, or a letter. The response "I sound it out" suggests a different orientation than either "I look it up in a dictionary" or "I reread the portion I didn't understand".

Knowing the respondent's unit of focus is key to understanding that person's theoretical orientation (Harste and Burke, 1977). For example, a decoding orientation involves the notion that reading requires translating print to sound and therefore is focused upon mastery of phoneme-grapheme correspondence as the primary factor in learning to read.

Thus a "sounding-out" response to the question above, indicating a focus on letters, would be linked to a decoding orientation. Further, a skills orientation views learning to read as a process of learning discrete and hierarchically arranged vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension skills, all of which are either focused upon or outgrowths of, word recognition or identification. In basal readers which have this orientation, new vocabulary is typically introduced prior to reading. Thus, a "look it up in the dictionary" response to the question above, indicating a focus on words, would be linked to a skills orientation. In contrast, a whole language orientation views language systems as interactive and interdependent. Letters and words are only meaningful as parts of larger syntactic and semantic structures, and becoming a proficient reader involves using one's language competence to make full use of syntactic and semantic cues to meaning. Thus, readers who cope with "something" that is unknown by rereading a portion of the text are focusing upon larger-than-word structural cues, or cues within the flow of language (Smith, Goodman, and Meredith, 1976), and this kind of response would be linked to whole language orientation. By analyzing responses to all ten interview questions, a respondent can thus be classified as having either a decoding, skills, or whole language orientation.

The interview used here is normally conducted orally by a researcher on an individual basis. In this setting, the researcher has the advantage of being able to elicit fairly complete and unambiguous responses, either by requesting more information from the subject, by restating the

question, or by asking an additional probing question. However, such individual interviews are time-consuming and tend to limit the investigator to small samples. It was hoped that requesting written responses from groups of subjects would allow the researchers to collect data from a larger sample, and that giving subjects a generous amount of time would facilitate clear responses.

Data was collected by presenting the ten interview questions in the form of a questionnaire. Questions were presented on three pages so that two to four inches of space was available following each for the subject's response. Each group of approximately 25 subjects were asked to answer the questions as completely as possible, with no time limit imposed. All subjects completed the interview within twenty minutes.

Analysis

Each of the 207 interviews was analyzed separately by each researcher, who coded each subject as having a decoding, skills, or whole language orientation. Codings were then compared for agreement Where the two codings did not match (approximately 10% of the cases) the researchers attempted to reach agreement through consultation. When such agreement was not readily reached, the interview in question was discarded from the sample. In addition, some of the interviews could not be coded due to insufficient or ambiguous responses; these were also discarded, learning 163 for further analysis.

Of these 163 interviews, 1 reflected a decoding orientation, 150 reflected a skills orientation, and 12 reflected a whole language

orientation. A chi-square test of goodness of fit was performed on this frequency data, assuming the expected frequencies in each cell to be $\frac{n}{3}$ or 54.33. The obtained chi-square of 253.795 with df=2 was significant at .001 and indicates a strong tendency to prefer a skills orientation. Similar tests were performed on the interviews from the elementary subgroup (χ^2 = 76.527, df=2, $p > .001$) and the secondary subgroups (χ^2 = 178.055, df=2, $p > .001$). Thus, the significant tendency to prefer a skills orientation was present in each subgroup as well as in the entire sample.

To test for significant differences bewteen groups in orientation preference, a chi-square test of independence was used. Since the contingency table contained cells with very small expected frequencies, the cells in the decoding column were combined with those in the skills column and Yates' correction for continuity (Guilford, 1965) was used. The results of this test (χ^2 = .6683, df=1, $p < .05$) indicate no significant differences between subgroups in their tendency to prefer a skills orientation.

Discussion

The strength of the tendency toward a skills orientation among these subjects is somewhat surprising; it is, however, probably reflective of their instructional histories. More importantly, it may well predict their instructional emphasis as teachers of reading. These data indicate a likelihood that the subjects studies will soon be influencing elementary and secondary students toward a notion of reading

wherein words are the critical cues to meaning. Proficient readers, however, rely primarily upon cues from syntactic and semantic structure to get meaning (Allen and Watson, 1976), and an instructional emphasis on other cues can hardly be expected to facilitate the development of proficiency.

This preliminary investigation employed an interview instrument that has not yet been validated; also, some of the written responses to the interview questions could not be coded, which resulted in considerable sample attrition. Moreover, the sample utilized does not permit wide generalization. Additional research is needed which can determine more conclusively the preferred theoretical orientations of preservice teachers. In addition, the question of whether subjects' orientations predict their instructional emphasis needs further study. However, the implications of these initial results do suggest a need to continue this line of inquiry.

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